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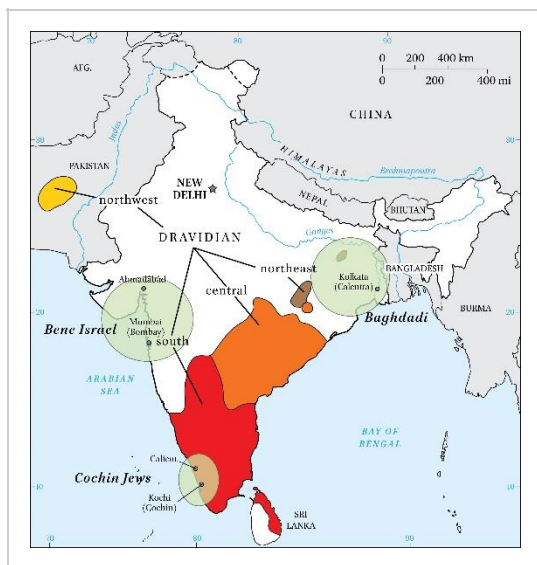
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# Jewish Malayalam

## 1. Historical Background

Malayalam is a Dravidian language currently spoken in the state of Kerala on the western coast of South India. The earliest records of Malayalam are inscriptions dated to the ninth century C.E. Malayalam literature began in the thirteenth century, with close affinities to two major classical Indian traditions, Sanskrit and Tamil, each of which influenced, albeit in different ways, the spoken language and the classical and regional literatures of the Hindu castes that form the majority of the population in Kerala.

The western coast of South India was already an important center of the trade between East and West Asia in late antiquity. Toward the end of the first millennium C.E., West Asian trader guilds of Muslims, Christians, and Jews regularly traversed the trade routes across the Indian Ocean, gradually settling in Kerala and integrating with the local Hindu population under the patronage of local kings and landowners. In the twentieth century, Muslims and Christians together composed over 40 percent of the population of Kerala, with Jews a minuscule minority of more or less the same socioeconomic status as the other monotheist castes. As the Malayalam language of Kerala came into contact with West Asian classical traditions in Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew, each of these communities produced its own distinctive literature and dialect.



Map showing ethnolinguistic concentrations of Jews (green circles) and the distribution of the Dravidian language family (red, orange and yellow areas). Based on maps by Eric Gaba (ethnolinguistic concentrations of Jews) and Merritt Ruhlen (Dravidian language family).

## Jewish History in Kerala in Pre-Colonial Times

Two inscriptions in Old Malayalam are evidence for the settlement of Jews in Kerala during the medieval period: the Syrian Christian Copper Plates (Kollam, 849 C.E.) and the Jewish Copper Plates (Kodungallur, 1000). The former contain signatures in Syriac, Kufic, Pahlavi, and Hebrew, suggestive of the religious identities of the beneficiaries of the grant, namely Christians, Muslims, and Jews from West Asia. The latter was granted to a West Asian trader

named Joseph Rabban, who was probably a Jew, because for several centuries the royal grant passed down through generations of Jews in Kerala. In both inscriptions, the beneficiaries belong to the *Añjuvaṇṇam* and *Maṇigrāmam*, terms apparently associated in early Old Malayalam with West Asian trader guilds.

Hundreds of letters found in the [Cairo Geniza](#), dating between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, provide more evidence for the presence of Jewish traders in Kerala at the beginning of the second millennium. Additionally, the travelogues of [Benjamin of Tudela](#) in the twelfth century and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in the fourteenth mention Jewish communities in south and central Kerala. The West Asian *Añjuvaṇṇam* and *Maṇigrāmam* trade guilds are mentioned in a fifteenth-century Malayalam composition from north Kerala, the *Payyannūrpāṭṭu*, thus providing circumstantial evidence that Jews were also involved in the trade centers of south Kerala.

Jewish communities must have evolved simultaneously in different places along the northern, southern, and central Kerala coast in the pre-colonial era. They integrated into the socioeconomic matrix of castes and creeds in conjunction with the integration of Muslims and Christians in the region.

## **Jewish History in Kerala in Colonial Times**

From the sixteenth century onward, there are more and more sources regarding Jewish communities in Kerala. In the early sixteenth century, as recorded in a letter sent to the rabbinate in [Alexandria](#) in 1524, the Jewish community of Cochin split. This resulted in the establishment of a segregated community of *Paradeśi* (foreigner) Jews a few decades later. In the seventeenth century, the *Paradeśi* community produced chronicles narrating its origin myths, claiming its founders were refugees from a Jewish kingdom that, according to the legend, existed for over a millennium in Kodungallur in central Kerala. The chronicles also mention other, non-*Paradeśi*, contemporary Jewish communities of the time in northern, central and southern Kerala, some of which no longer existed in the twentieth century. Local place-names are retained today in Kerala Jewish family names (e.g., Maday, Muttam) and in Jewish Malayalam songs (e.g., Palur).

In 1954, the vast majority of Kerala Jews migrated to Israel from eight different Jewish communities, some of them founded before the colonial era (Parur, Chennamangalam). By this time, Kerala Jews were speaking a peculiar dialect of Malayalam documented and defined as a Jewish language only much later in 2009. Kerala Jews who migrated to Israel in the 1950s retained, even at this late period, some usages of their distinctively Jewish Malayalam dialect.

## **2. Jewish Literature in Kerala**

Written literary texts are the earliest evidence for a Jewish language and literature in Kerala. A corpus of distinctively Jewish literary compositions survives in thirty-five handwritten notebooks, the earliest of which is dated to 1876. The corpus consists of Malayalam songs performed mainly at weddings and a few Hebrew poems, some transliterated into Malayalam script. Since women performed the songs and were the owners of many of the notebooks, this corpus is mostly associated with women, but men probably took part in

transmitting, transcribing, and preserving it. Several songs were clearly composed by skilled poets, not necessarily Jews, while many more are adaptations of non-Jewish Malayalam folksongs or free translations of Hebrew liturgy into Malayalam.

Kerala Jews also produced and preserved verbatim translations called *tamsīr*, possibly from the Judeo-Arabic word *tafsīr*, denoting the translation of the Bible into Arabic by Sa'adya Gaon in the tenth century. The verbatim translations were transmitted orally, leaving only one existing written record of a verbatim translation of Pirque Avot, transcribed by an anonymous scribe possibly around the late nineteenth century. At the same time, in Cochin, a Jew of Iraqi origin, Daniel Jacob Hacoen, published in print verbatim translations of Hebrew poems, possibly for didactic purposes. The *tamsīr* tradition presents meticulous word-by-word translations that do not always fit the tunes sung at celebrations. Oral recitations of *tamsīr* were recorded in the 1970s in Israel, but by now only a few elderly individuals remember fragments of *tamsīr*. The extent of the *tamsīr* oral texts may have been much broader than what is retained in the documented texts and recordings. Though *tamsīr* was associated mainly with the men of the community, some women may have studied and recited texts as well.

Finally, there is a corpus of Hebrew poems called *kollas* (etymology unclear), the earliest of them composed in Kerala during the late sixteenth century by two poets of Yemenite origin, Namya Mutta and Elijah Adani. This indigenous Hebrew poetry was preserved in the prayerbook, and to this day Kerala Jews perform it at life-cycle celebrations and on other special occasions.

### 3. Jewish Malayalam Songs: A Brief Survey

The corpus of Jewish Malayalam songs is eclectic. It encompasses songs of different genres, themes, and linguistic registers that may well have been composed in different periods and regions. A group of thirteen songs in the typical Dravidian classical style called *pāṭṭu* (“song”) is probably the oldest layer of Jewish Malayalam literature, dating approximately from the fifteenth century. These songs retell biblical stories with occasional references to the Midrash. Their language and style resemble the fifteenth-century *Payyannūrpāṭṭu* mentioned above, a north Kerala composition in Old Malayalam. Another group of songs with similar themes and references most resemble the narrative songs of the Syrian Christians of south Kerala. Their language is typical of sixteenth-century Malayalam. The distribution of the *pāṭṭu* songs in the notebooks, as compared with the distribution of the narrative songs, suggests that the corpus includes at least two different literary traditions: one originating in north Kerala around the fifteenth century, the other in south Kerala around the sixteenth century.

Apart from these two genres— biblical *pāṭṭu* and narrative songs—there are also adaptations of Hebrew poems into Jewish Malayalam called *arttham* (“meaning”). These adaptations are free paraphrases, different from the meticulous verbatim translations of Hebrew poems printed in Cochin in the late nineteenth century. They were clearly composed for performance, and some were still popular among Kerala Jews decades after their mass migration to Israel. The language of the *arttham* translations is of a later period than the biblical *pāṭṭu* and the narrative songs. *Arttham* translations were still composed as late as the early twentieth century, but this tradition may have begun as early as the late

seventeenth century. As opposed to the biblical *pāṭṭu* and the narrative songs, the *arttham* translations were probably composed in central Kerala, with Parur and Cochin as prominent centers of literary productivity.

## 4. A Jewish Language and a Malayalam Dialect

Spoken Malayalam is a cluster of dialects, each associated with a certain region and caste, and often retaining archaic linguistic features. Jewish Malayalam shares certain features peculiar to other dialects of Malayalam, especially Mappilla Malayalam, a Muslim dialect of north Kerala. Jewish Malayalam is also a Jewish language, with the main characteristics of other Jewish languages as classified by Moshe Bar-Asher: retention of archaisms of the host language, verbatim translations from Hebrew, a Hebrew component (Hebrew loanwords embedded in the spoken language), and the use of Hebrew phrases in idioms, tokens of speech, and the like.

A nursery rhyme still remembered by Kerala Jews in Israel is an example for the use of archaisms, verbatim translations, the Hebrew component, and Hebrew phrases all in one. It is a verbatim translation of a verse from the Book of Proverbs (1:8), borrowed from an oral tradition of verbatim translations by women to be sung to children before sleep. The Malayalam translation follows each line in Hebrew:

<i>ƶema</i>	<i>ben.i</i>	<i>musar</i>	<i>avi.xa</i>	
hear-IMP	son.1SG	moral-DO	father.2SG	
<i>neṅḍe</i>	<i>va:va:ḍe</i>	<i>sittā</i>	<i>ni:</i>	<i>ke:ḷə</i>
2SG.GEN	father-GEN	moral-DO	2SG.NOM	hear-IMP

Hear, my son, your father's moral,

<i>ve-ḷal</i>	<i>titoƶ</i>	<i>toraḏ</i>	<i>ime.xa</i>
CONJ-NEG	abandon-FUT.2SG	teaching.OBL	mother.2SG
<i>neṅḍe</i>	<i>umma:ḍe</i>	<i>to:ra:ṅa</i>	<i>kaividalle:</i>
2SG.GEN	mother.GEN	Tora.ACC	abandon-NEG.IMP

And do not forsake your mother's teaching.

<i>ƶaday</i>	<i>ca:cikko:</i>	<i>mo:ṅe</i>
God	sleep-PRM	son-VOC

Go ahead and sleep (with) God, my son!

Apart from being a sample of the verbatim translations, it has an example of the Hebrew component, *to:ra:ṅa*, a Hebrew word inflected with a Malayalam morpheme, *-(i)ṅa*. The use of this morpheme to mark a direct object is an archaic retention of the link-morph *-iṅ* with the accusative morpheme *-a*, instead of *-e* without the link-morph in standard Malayalam. Also archaic is the lexeme *sittā*, a loanword from Sanskrit (*ḍṛḍha*) that has been replaced in contemporary speech by *ƶikṣa*, a Sanskrit loanword adapted in modern times.

The second example of Jewish Malayalam speech is a legend (an audio sample of this legend is available [here](#); the accompanying text can be read [here](#)) blended with Hebrew loanwords like *tfila* and *mikveh*, as in the following examples:

<i>tefila</i>	<i>kazicca:l</i>	<i>ella:varikkum</i>	<i>makkaḷ</i>	<i>uṇḍa:v.um</i>
prayer	AUX.COND	all.DAT	children	become.FUT

If he prayed, everybody would have children.

<i>avaḷə</i>	<i>mikkve:ʷ</i>	<i>Poyi</i>
she.NOM	ritual bath.LOC	go.PST

She went to the ritual bath.

Archaisms too are found in this story, like the dative morpheme *-ikkə* after a final *-ṇ*, instead of the standard Malayalam *-ə*, as in *zakkeṇ-ikkə*, 'to the old man':

<i>a:</i>	<i>zakkeṇ.ikkə</i>	<i>fe:va</i>	<i>ba:nott</i>	<i>oṇḍə</i>
that	old man.DAT	seven	daughters	exist.FUT

That old man has seven daughters.

Another example is the use of the auxiliary nonfinite *koṇḍə* instead of the standard Malayalam *-ittə*, as in *voyi-kkoṇḍə*, 'after going':

<i>appa:</i>	<i>i:</i>	<i>kocca</i>	<i>vo:yi-kkoṇḍə</i>	<i>umma:ḍə</i>	<i>paraṇṇi</i>
then	this	child.NOM	go.NFIN-AUX.NFIN	mother.SOC	tell.PST

Then this child went and told his mother.

More features of lexicon and morphology are listed in **Gamliel**, "Documenting Jewish Malayalam"; the Hebrew component is treated in detail in **Gamliel**, "The Hebrew Component."

Benjamin Hary uses the terms "religiolect" and "castelect" to define Jewish languages in relation to other dialects of their host language. This is especially relevant in the case of Jewish Malayalam, which evolved in a multicultural society that had absorbed several religious and literary traditions, thus allowing for a relatively wide spectrum of religiolects and castelects to evolve.

See also:

[Jewish Neo-Aramaic](#)

[Judeo-Arabic - History and Linguistic Description](#)

[Judeo-Berber](#)

[Judeo-Greek](#)

Judeo-Italian (Tunisian)

Judeo-Persian Language

Judeo-Persian Literature

Judeo-Spanish

Judeo-Spanish Literature

Juhūrī (Judeo-Tat or Judeo-Tātī)

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